

Providing Leadership in Environmental Entomology

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Tobacco Flea Beetles

The tobacco flea beetle is one of the most common pests of tobacco. This insect is usually of little consequence in South Carolina, but can probably be found in every field every year. And, from time to time, it can be a serious pest.

The adult is a very small, dark brown beetle, measuring only about 1/16 inch in length. The name flea beetle is derived from the fact that it hops in a flea-like fashion that makes it very easy to identify in the field. Damage is generally the result of adult feeding, though the larvae do feed on small rootlets and may actually tunnel into the plants. The real damage of this feeding may be in producing a means of entry for certain fungal diseases.



A tobacco flea beetle adult.
Photo: Clemson University CE
Series 122-1366

The damage caused by adult flea beetles is small, round holes in the leaves. A severely-damaged leaf may look as though it had been shot at close range by a shotgun. Although small, these beetles have voracious

appetites and can eat a lot of tobacco.

Damage may occur at any time during the tobacco growing season. Although plant bed damage is usually not severe, the beds may serve as a breeding site from which the beetles may move into the fields. The most severe damage usually results either immediately after transplanting or at harvest. The early damage results when beetles are attracted to plants that have wilted after transplanting. Heavy feeding on

the small bud leaves of the newly transplanted plants may stunt and sometimes kill these small transplants. Later damage results as beetles keep concentrating further up the plant as lower leaves are harvested.



Tobacco flea beetle adult and damage to leaf.

Photo: Clemson University CE
Series 121-1207

Various insecticides are available for flea beetle control both in the plant beds and in the field. Since the list of labeled products is constantly changing, and since available products varies from state to state, there will be no

mention of specific products. With all insecticides, read and follow label instructions carefully.

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EIIS/AG-14 (New 03/1999).